**Science News**



***Does It Take One to Know One? New Research Reveals Conspiring Conspiracy Theorists***

ScienceDaily (May 4, 2011) — Conspiracy theories -- such as those surrounding the death of Princess Diana -- are more likely to be believed by people who are willing themselves to conspire, new research at the University of Kent has shown.

In a paper to be published in the British Journal of Social Psychology, Dr Karen Douglas and Dr Robbie Sutton, two researchers from the University's School of Psychology, found that ­- in keeping with the psychological process called projection -- an individual's perception that "I would do it" informs his or her perception that "they did it."

The research, titled *Does it take one to know one? Endorsement of conspiracy theories is influenced by personal willingness to conspire*, considered the responses of around 250 UK undergraduates to 17 major alleged conspiracies, such as the 'assassinations' of Princess Diana and John F. Kennedy, the 'faking' of the moon landings and the 'orchestration' of the 9/11 attacks by the US government.

In the first study, participants were asked whether they would personally play a role in such conspiracies, if they had been in a position to do so. An example of this was 'If you were in the position of the government, would you have ordered the attack on the Twin Towers?' The more that participants indicated a willingness to conspire, the more they found the same conspiracy theories to be plausible, interesting, and worth considering.

Further, the researchers found that participants who were highly Machiavellian -- defined as willing to exploit others for personal gain -- were more likely to indicate willingness to conspire, and as a result, were more likely to believe in conspiracy theories.

In the second study, half of the participants were asked to remember a time that they had helped someone. The research team reasoned that this would temporarily enhance participants' sense that they are moral people. As expected, these participants, when compared to a control group, were less willing to conspire, and as a result, were less likely to take conspiracy theories seriously.

'We wanted to test a new explanation of why conspiracy theories are endorsed in an internet age when people have access to a matrix of often conflicting information from a variety of sources,' said Dr Douglas.

'We found that in their search for explanations under such uncertain and confusing conditions, people rely partly on projection -- the assumption that others would behave much as they would.

'We're not saying however that all conspiracy theorists are immoral or that they have arrived at their beliefs through projection. It's important to note that other factors may lead people to believe in conspiracy theories. Also, our research says nothing about the truth or objective plausibility of such theories. However what we have shown is that one reason some people endorse conspiracy theories is because is they project their own moral tendencies onto the supposed conspirators', she said.

**Journal Reference**:

1. Karen M. Douglas, Robbie M. Sutton. **Does it take one to know one? Endorsement of conspiracy theories is influenced by personal willingness to conspire**. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 2011; DOI: [10.1111/j.2044-8309.2010.02018.x](http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8309.2010.02018.x)

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Article Responses:

1. Describe the purpose of this study?

2. In the first study, what correlation did the researchers find?

3. What does “Machiavellian” mean?

4. What is projection? According to the study, how is it used in a person’s decision-making?

5. Describe the findings and conclusion based on the results of the study.

Overview:

1. What are at least 3 things that should be considered when investigating any conspiracy theory? Give some details/reasons or background of each.